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Special Issue Editors' Introduction: Observing Autocracies from the Ground Floor*

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Writers, artists, and teachers have long understood that repressive governments manipulate the ways we understand them, twisting knowledge and education to their own ends. In seeking to justify their existence, the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Mao's China (to name a few) generated national histories, educational systems, and scientific doctrines in line with official ideologies. While social scientists initially emphasized terror as the "lifeblood" of the totalitarian system (Fainsod, 1953; Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1956; Gleason 1995), state violence invariably waned over time. Perhaps more relevant to understanding totalitarian rule, writers like Franz Kafka, George Orwell, Yevgeny Zamyatin, and Arthur Koestler saw distortions of history, empirical facts, and truth as intimately connected with a stultifying, repressive bureaucracy that celebrated its own image while punishing individuals who publically disclosed the ways it really worked. Reflecting on their own life experiences, Eastern European dissidents like Vaclav Havel and György Konrád produced powerful accounts of individuals as isolated and powerless

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within communist governments that twisted and distorted the production of information about politics, leaving individuals isolated and seemingly powerless.

Few contemporary regimes, save perhaps the People's Republic of North Korea, go to these same lengths to manufacture a totalitarian version of history. Rather, now, at the “end of the history” (Fukuyama, 2006), democracy is the only acceptable façade left standing (Jowitt, 1992, Levitsky & Way, 2010). Authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes all offer at least the pretense of abiding by democratic norms while seeking to obscure or obfuscate their autocratic tendencies. Still, these practices occupy a peculiar bind spot for political scientists. It is not that social scientists are gullible, naïve, or partisan. It is that the discipline that emerged within and for the study of democratic regimes, and has been committed to a positivist, objective notion of scientific truth has had a hard time grappling with the possibilities that the ‘truths’ emerging from authoritarian settings might have different valances.

Even as political science once again embraces the study of authoritarianism, then, it remains difficult to get scholars to talk about the challenges they confront in studying authoritarian regimes. This is not just a difficulty faced by scholars working and living in authoritarian regimes. Social scientists are more likely to interpret political challenges to social scientific research in terms of methodological challenges: after all, surely data and research methods have little to do with regime. And yet, much of the past study of authoritarianism (and totalitarianism before it) involved devising ways of coping with the limitations imposed by closed regimes. Seemingly simple tasks—obtaining visas, conducting interviews or surveys, accessing archives, and observing informal processes out on the street—become obstacles.

Certainly, these challenges exist in the study of democratic regimes, as well. The scientific study of politics emerged within democracies for the study of democracies. Despite the obvious constraints that authoritarianism poses for those seeking to study it, scholars must still articulate those challenges involved in studying authoritarianism within the discipline of democracy. The penalty for failing to do so is to risk one's research appearing unintelligible if not unscientific. Nevertheless, there are systematic ways that authoritarian regimes create methodological and ethical dilemmas for scholars. Dismissing the link between particular dilemmas and authoritarianism is akin to explaining the difficulty of navigating a cluttered room in the dark without acknowledging the absence of light as an underlying cause. To extend the analogy, the absence of light may seem insignificant or even imperceptible for those already familiar with the terrain. Some may even deny the darkness exists, blaming it instead on the observer's biased views. Those encountering the room for the first time might embrace the absence of light as the room's essential characteristic. Others, more deductively inclined, might construct statistical models of the room's characteristics from afar, relying on those already familiar with the terrain to collect their data or examining similar rooms in similar houses to infer its dimensions. Regardless of approach, all may acknowledge the absence of light but treat it as a background condition that lacks causal relation to the difficulty of getting around the clutter.

Political scientists' interest in authoritarianism has been growing in recent years. A quick assessment of recent papers presented at APSA shows steady increase in those with the keywords "authoritarian" and "authoritarianism" and a corresponding decline in those concerning "democracies" and "democratization" (FIGURE 1). Similarly, a search

of journal abstracts shows the stagnation and decline of research on democratization and the concomitant ascent of studies on authoritarianism (FIGURE 2). With the recent resurgence of interest in authoritarianism, political scientists updated well-worn practices of elaborating the logic of authoritarian rule. In past studies of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, scholars often focused on discrete, observable configurations of power and the operations of formal institutions in authoritarian regimes. In the contemporary literature on the “new authoritarianism,” scholars once more rely upon these visible institutional elements of authoritarian rule. There is a genuine puzzle, of course, in dictators’ reliance on formally democratic institutions that would seem to diminish their personal and informal power. However, the new generation of scholars depart from past literatures in using these visible elements in deductive fashion to produce formal models of elite behavior and to generate quantitative data for statistical testing (Gandhi, 2008; Schedler, 2013; Svoboda 2012). Such works are not lacking in methodological sophistication, but they remain vulnerable to the basic problem that the formal and public operations of authoritarian institutions are often secondary to the secret or informal political processes. In the end, a deductive approach can only test the *implications* of an argument about the internal political machinations of authoritarian regimes in terms of their correlation with regime stability or survival rather than testing the argument through direct observation. There is a deep problem of endogeneity when examining the public face of dictatorial regimes. As a recent review article on “Democratic Authoritarianism” notes, there remains “a dearth of empirical evidence” and an “inability to distinguish cause from effect.” The article concludes that it is “unlikely to ever provide evidence for the effect of these institutions on par with the kind of evidence

provided about institutions in advanced democracies, and no one should expect it to” (Brancati, 2014: 323-324) Do, as a growing genre of scholarship suggests, legislatures make dictatorships more robust and enduring? Or do only robust and enduring dictatorships adopt legislative facades?

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

If we were to proceed in similar fashion to those who use game theory to generate testable hypotheses about authoritarianism, would we be able to make some general deductions about the relationship of various kinds of authoritarian regimes to research methods and fieldwork? An underlying concern of game theoretic approaches is to circumvent the problem of preference falsification. Preference falsification refers to an individual’s public expression of views that differ from their privately held views or opinions. While one potentially finds preference falsification wherever researchers ask sensitive or controversial questions, it is of particular concern in authoritarian states. As Kuran (1995: 1538) noted, “the very forces that discourage truthful expression [in non-democratic regimes] also inhibit the collection and dissemination of opinion data.” Consider, for instance, the problem of determining the extent of preference falsification among interview respondents in a dictatorship. Respondents may conceal their opinions about the regime or its politics for fear of violence, repression, or other repercussions, possibly owing to concerns about regime surveillance or simply ordinary paranoia. Yet as long as we are focused on connecting the propensity to falsify one’s preferences with the regime’s institutional characteristics, the psychological mechanism is not relevant.

Hence, a deductive approach might be considered superior to fieldwork approaches involving direct contact with respondents.

Much work in this tradition presents authoritarian regimes in terms of substantive, generalizable differences: degrees of state capacity, presence of legislatures or multiparty systems, quality and availability of independent media, access to global capital flows, internet access and censorship, availability or tolerance of organized opposition, degrees of ethnic diversity, varieties of territorial cleavages, access to higher education, and so forth. On one hand, this is quite a useful way to avoid the temptation of essentializing autocracies in terms of national stereotypes (such as the idea of a cultural disposition toward dictatorship). However, the latter categories are often derivative of state capacity, while assessments of state capacity tend to be inconsistent and contested. Among the most common indicators of state capacity, large budgets and bureaucracies do not make states efficacious. The massive costs of constructing Olympics facilities for Beijing in 2008 and Sochi in 2014, particularly when compared to other Olympics games held in democratic states, serve less as indicators of state capacity than endemic corruption and extraordinary security burdens. This is especially evident when mapping the total costs of mega-events like the Olympics against host countries' Freedom House ratings (FIGURE 3).¹

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

In the same vein, it might be theoretically attractive to deduce that autocracies with high capacity are most likely to induce preference falsification, as high state capacity ought to translate into the ability to reliably repress one's citizens (and citizens' awareness of that capacity). Repression can take a number of forms. Short of the resort to

outright violence, a high capacity state can withhold patronage or use bureaucratic harassment to induce compliance. However, citizens in low capacity autocracies may engage in preference falsification because (to paraphrase Weber) the state fails to exercise a monopoly on the legitimate means of violence and coercion, leaving them extremely vulnerable to local *caciques*, warlords, or crime bosses. Citizens' uncertainty about the state may be matched by a regime's uncertainty about citizens' loyalties (or its own subordinates and local representatives, for that matter), such that rumor and suspicion can become powerful forces. Under such circumstances, the state may opt to repress frequently and violently, especially if one assumes that low capacity autocracies rely more readily on despotic than infrastructural power (Mann 1988). In both cases, then, one might reasonably expect all citizens to engage in preference falsification regardless of the degree of state capacity. Turning to elites (opposition leaders, business elites, or regime subordinates), one easily comes to a similar conclusion: there is every incentive for the interviewee to engage in preference falsification when the potential risks of repression are more real and personal for the respondent than the abstract scientific benefits for interviewer.

In treating respondents within authoritarian regimes as interested actors to explain their engaging in preference falsification, one should also consider the circumstances under which it would be in their interest *not* to falsify their preferences. Without awareness of context gained from immersion in the field and the corresponding sense of the "on stage" and "off stage" differences in a community's life (Kuran 1995: 1542), the interviewer potentially becomes the unwitting agent of the respondent. One set of circumstances may conceivably be conjured by survey techniques that remove any

repercussions for the respondent, such as list, evaluation, and randomization experiments that ensure respondents' anonymity. However, verification of findings from these kinds of studies is particularly rare, as Ryan Sheely points out in this special edition.

But when is preference falsification unlikely? Deductive approaches tend to wave away these questions, essentially positing that everyone engages in preference falsification in some form or fashion. Politicians lie because they can (Mearsheimer, 2011). Everyday citizens lie because they must. Though authoritarian institutions differ in characteristics, there is no deductive means to tell when and how they might induce such obscurant behavior.

THE QUALITATIVE, INDUCTIVE CORNERSTONE IN THE STUDY OF AUTHORITARIANISM

This special edition seeks to highlight and explore the critical role of qualitative, fieldwork-based research in the study of authoritarianism. It builds upon a symposium featured in the *APSA Comparative Democratization* newsletter in 2011 and benefits from the insights yielded by that experience. New techniques for studying authoritarian regimes quantitatively are proliferating, including social media analysis (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013), compiling biographical databases (Shih, Adolph, and Liu, 2012), survey experiments (Frye, 2006; Brader & Tucker, 2009), and triangulation (Pepinsky, 2009). Still, the basic tasks of field research are taken for granted and often undervalued. In fact, much of the latest quantitative and deductive, formal model based approaches to authoritarianism essentially stands on the shoulders of qualitative research that frequently goes unmentioned. Take the widely acclaimed selectorate theory advanced by Bruce

Bueno de and others (de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Marrow, 2006; Morrow, de Mesquita, Siverson, & Smith, 2008; de Mesquita, 2006). The idea that authoritarian regimes focus on trying to establish “winning coalitions” in a similar fashion as parliamentary democracies has a clear elegance. Coupling a deductive model with effective use of cross-national quantitative analysis shows support for these hypotheses. But much of the empirical data used to test the key hypotheses came from surveys sent out to individual country experts to evaluate the size and relative openness of political regimes.² Without some attention to potential limitations in the underlying inductive investigation, then, the entire edifice of selectorate theory is questionable.

Similar to recent works examining research in war zones and other dangerous locations (Sriram, King, Mertus, Martin-Ortega, & Herman, 2009; Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000, Dolnik, ed., 2013) we have asked scholars to reflect on their field-based research and to consider how methods and context met in the course of their research. Every one of these researchers described a measure of friction—if not an outright collision—between what they assumed to be methodological best practices and what was feasible in the authoritarian situation. Investigating authoritarian regimes, similar to investigating countries in the midst of civil war, forces difficult choices upon the researchers about personal safety and the safety of informants. A chilling illustration was provided when Alexander Sodiqov, a political science PhD student from the University of Toronto, was arrested in Tajikistan and reportedly charged with treason after interviewing an opposition leader (“A Scholar Faces Treason Charges,” 2014). Even more disturbing was the brutal murder of Giulio Regeni, a PhD student from Cambridge University, in Cairo in early 2016. Observers linked the manner of his death to state

security and speculated that it was related to his research into labor matters, or possibly to his writing for an opposition newspaper under a pseudonym (Kirchgaessner, 2016). Yet, the response (there are no real solutions) to these problems are seldom discussed in the open, much less formally incorporated into methodological training.

More than simply comprising a practical handbook or field manual that compiles the way scholarship on and in authoritarianism might actually done, this edition probes how authoritarianism itself conditions and constrains research. Embracing reflexivity means recognizing two crucial power differentials that define research on authoritarian regimes. The first exists between scholars and research subjects. It is defined by the capriciousness of regimes, the risks of coercion or intimidation, and the consequent possibilities of self-censorship, either on the part of respondents or the scholar herself. The second differential exists within the scholarly community. It is defined by institutionalization of disciplinary norms and standards that prioritize certain kinds of research in certain kinds of places, while marginalizing other techniques and other geographic foci. Without such a reflexive assessment, scholars risk becoming partisans, for example, by presenting one-sided data drawn only from opposition figures or unintentionally replicating the agendas of state agencies or nongovernmental organizations.

Given the variety of experience and research priorities displayed, we have resisted the urge to impose a single unified rubric that defines authoritarianism and its various subsidiary concepts. Authoritarianism, like democracy, is already a conceptual and taxonomical morass. Efforts to create standardized and general definitions of various regime types, while undoubtedly useful from a quantitative perspective, are prone also to

obscure certain critical factors in regimes that can affect how research is conducted. The stakes in the debate about “electoral authoritarianism” versus “illiberal democracy,” are largely about the semantics and connotations and are often divorced from issues of empirics and denotation. Rather, we have invited each contributor to evaluate how their particular regime has been treated in the literature and to reflect on how distinctive characteristics of the regime constrained or enabled certain kinds of research practices. For virtually every case, one finds contentious debates over the appropriate regime category. Moreover, regime instability, war and revolution further compound these debates. Even when stable, nominally democratic regimes emerge from authoritarian rule, the lingering influence of authoritarian institutions and practices remains a going concern that complicates the assessment of democratic consolidation.

We further buck the tendencies dominant in quantitative and deductive modes of inquiry by organizing the issue explicitly around regional clusters. There is, of course, a long-standing tension in comparative politics between those pursuing global generalization and those who consider themselves area specialists (Bates, 1997; Ahram, 2011). While the tables may have turned in favor of the former in recent decades, (Mahoney, 2007) we find that the study of authoritarianism in particular, the emergences of general categorizations and concepts often are grounded in area-specific forms of inquiry. According to Geddes’s own effort to create a general taxonomy of authoritarian sub-types, militarist regimes were typical of Latin American (bureaucratic) authoritarianism and personalist regimes of Africa (Geddes, 2003). One finds hybrid regimes throughout much of the post-Soviet space with a concentration of personalist regimes in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Hale, 2005). Rentier and personalist

autocracies are commonly found in the Middle East and North Africa, with the Arab Spring drawing particular attention to the apparent “monarchical advantage” (Menaldo, 2012; Yom & Gause, 2012). This decision is also in line with the reflexive bent of the effort. Most scholars in comparative politics—especially those who endeavor to spend long time in the field—begin their work with an interest in a country or region, not a research topic such as authoritarianism. Robert Bates, for instance, is now primarily associated with the pursuit of generalized theory, formal modelling, and eschewing area studies boundaries. Yet, as he told an interviewer, a trip to Africa while he was in high school set his career path: “I decided that going to Africa was the most important thing I’d ever done in my life and I wanted a career that would get me back to Africa as often as possible” (Munck & Snyder, eds., 2007: 506). Though Bates sits uneasy with identifying himself as an Africa area specialist, he still maintains that field research itself is essential (Munck and Snyder, eds., 2007: 535-537).

Overall, we hope that organizing the edition in terms of region lends it an intuitive, real world dimension. The articles reflect scholars’ experiences working around the globe—in itself, a practical resource for current and future scholars researching those areas—and across different times. In some cases, contributors’ observations and recommendations contradict those presented in other articles. In our opinion, this reflects the extent to which conducting fieldwork under authoritarian conditions amplifies both scholarly judgment and the spontaneous or contingent circumstances that can produce breakthroughs in fieldwork experiences. However, we also expected commonalities to emerge from the contributions which, when taken together, would yield some practical suggestions about the influence of authoritarian regimes on the production of knowledge

about authoritarianism, as well as some practical suggestions for scholars anticipating fieldwork in these countries and those similar to them.

The article by Ariel Ahram and Paul Goode elaborates these challenges by framing authoritarian regimes as self-conscious producers of ignorance (Ahram & Goode XXXX). An essential shared characteristic of all dictatorships is their use of bureaucratic obstruction, disinformation, or coercion to conceal their informal and formal operations. The article presents a range of ethical, practical, and methodological dilemmas that scholars face when studying authoritarian and hybrid regimes, concluding that adopting a reflexive approach to the study of authoritarianism can yield additional benefits for scholars grappling with authoritarian practices within democracies.

Following on the concept of authoritarian regimes as producers of ignorance, Robert Barros's article focuses on the problem of secrecy as policy (Barros XXXX). He draws particular attention to the possibilities and limits of using publicly available materials, what he calls "regime artifacts," to step behind "the authoritarian veil of secrecy" and infer elite power relations from indirect sources. Using the example of decree-laws in Pinochet's Chile, Barros notes that laws enacted by the junta provided a generally accurate sketch of the regime's internal power structure, even as contemporary analysts mistakenly focused instead on Pinochet's personal power. The Chilean example points to a broader difficulty of accurately contextualizing documentary evidence when authoritarian regimes work to conceal and suppress knowledge of elite decision-making.

Ahram further probes the difficulties associated with state secrecy in examining the changes in Iraq studies following the overthrow of the Ba'th in 2003 (Ahram XXXX). The common problem of access to the Baathist regime led scholars to develop innovative

approaches to the study of Iraq from afar. Still, research on Iraq was relatively meager and detached from broader theoretical discussions in political science. Following regime change, opportunities for fieldwork and archival access increased dramatically, adding impetus to a new round of theoretically-engaged scholarship. Nevertheless, he draws attention to new challenges arising in the form of exposure to violent conditions, the limitations of embedded fieldwork, and the temptation to view current events in teleological terms.

Shervin Malekzadeh's article focuses on the ongoing problems of access in Iran and prescribes some guidelines for field research in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries (Malekzadeh XXXX). He notes that overly-rigid research designs are almost certain to fail when confronted with the capriciousness and opacity of authoritarian regimes, even when examining seemingly innocuous topics. Still, in this respect the researcher's experience is likely to parallel that of an ordinary citizen's in attempting to navigate networks of influence, regulation, and government control. This bottom-up perspective suggests that empathy with the challenges citizens face in everyday life may be a useful heuristic as a first step towards advancing one's research.

Goode's article similarly considers the relationship between regime change and scholarship, focusing on studies of post-Soviet politics before and after the wave of Color Revolutions in the 2000s (Goode XXXX). While the scientific opening of the 1990s and the booming study of post-communist democratization generated a wealth of data and connected post-Soviet politics with broader theoretical studies in comparative politics, these sit uneasily with the retreat from democracy across Eurasia. Drawing on a decade of published research on politics in the former Soviet states, this article demonstrates that

many scholars continued to draw from data and analytical frames that assumed democratization. By contrast, fieldwork-based studies were far more likely to acknowledge democratic reversals. Goode argues that scientific closure is not just a product of autocratization, but emerges at the intersection of authoritarianism and research cycles in comparative politics.

Delving deeper into the relationship between political and scientific closure among post-Soviet regimes, Lawrence Markowitz observes that unofficial constraints on fieldwork in Central Asia rose steadily in the 2000s and hardened by mid-decade after a brief opening for scholars in the 1990s (Markowitz XXXX). He relates his experience conducting fieldwork in Uzbekistan to develop strategies for managing research design, data collection, and elite interviewing despite conditions of scientific closure. Through careful observation, the use of multiple forms of data from open sources, and awareness of opportunity, it becomes possible to observe even closed institutions like state security agencies.

Turning to the largest authoritarian state on the planet, Marie-Eve Reny points out that most published research on politics in China remains constrained by regime opacity and the complications associated with gaining access (Reny XXXX). Drawing on her prior fieldwork experience, she argues that these constraints may, in fact, present opportunities for comparativists willing to embrace informality as a strategy for conducting research. Such a strategy requires an awareness of political context, but it also potentially allows scholars to overcome regime-imposed restrictions.

Cyanne Loyle assesses the kinds of constraints researchers are likely to face in closed regimes with reference to her field experiences in Rwanda (Loyle XXXX). She

contends that scholars may overcome the difficulties of conducting research in closed regimes through a combination of local knowledge, creativity, and respect. It is particularly crucial that scholars learn to identify security risks to themselves, to respondents, and to one's data. Loyle thus emphasizes the potential and the constraints of informality in research design and highlights specific ethical dilemmas associated with working in and on a local community.

Ryan Sheely presents an ethnographic account of his own field work in Kenya (Sheely XXXX). Sheely highlights a long authoritarian shadow, originating in the bureaucratic practices of British colonialism and continuing through the post-colonial Kenya state. Even after Kenya's (assumed) democratic opening in the mid-2000, the state maintains bureaucratic means to oversee—and obstruct—researchers in the field. The need to deal with profound power differentials that existed between himself as a white, American researcher and the various factions within his local community compelled him to take the novel and unexpected turn toward field experimentation as a way to mitigate at least some potential sources of bias.

In the concluding article, David Art argues that the stakes could not be higher in the quest for quality information about the inner workings of non-democratic regimes (Art XXXX). In synthesizing the findings of the previous articles, he emphasizes that studies of authoritarian regimes cannot be held to the same methodological standards as studies of democracies and urges scholars to “think more like detectives.” For this, scholars must be willing to adopt a historical stance and learn from studies of past authoritarian regimes.

Figure 1.1: APSA Paper Trends, 2008-2013³

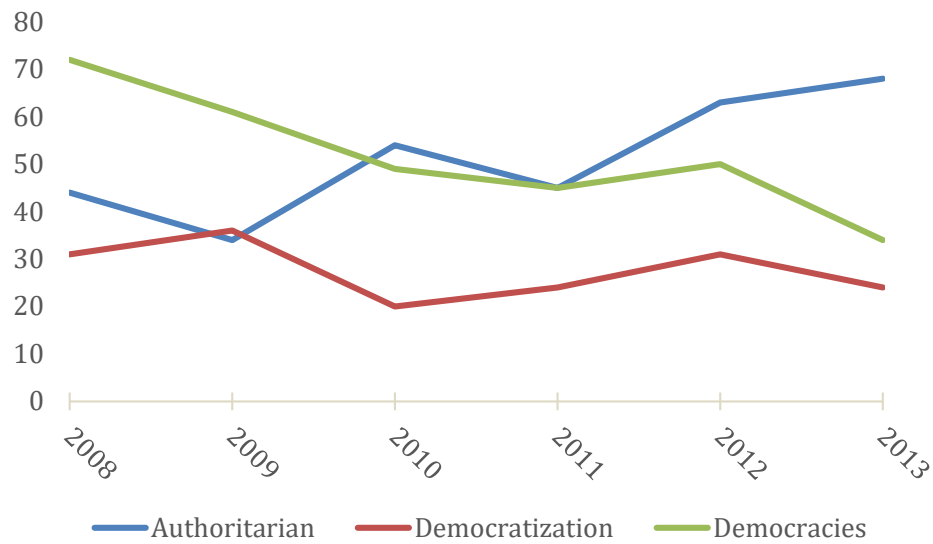


Figure 1.2: 'Democratization and 'Authoritarian/Authoritarianism' in Journal Article Abstracts, 2001-2011 (ProQuest Worldwide Political Science Abstracts)

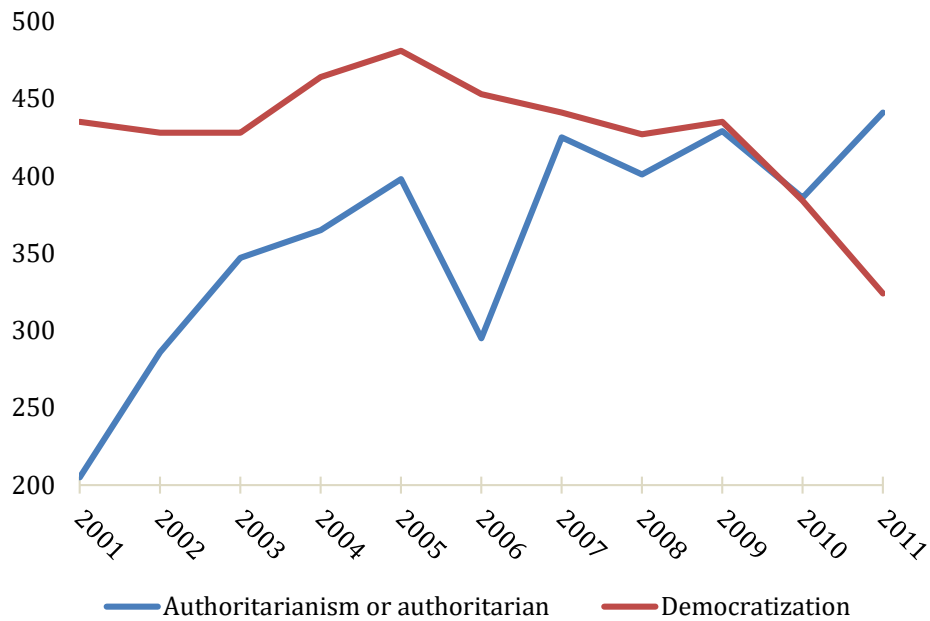
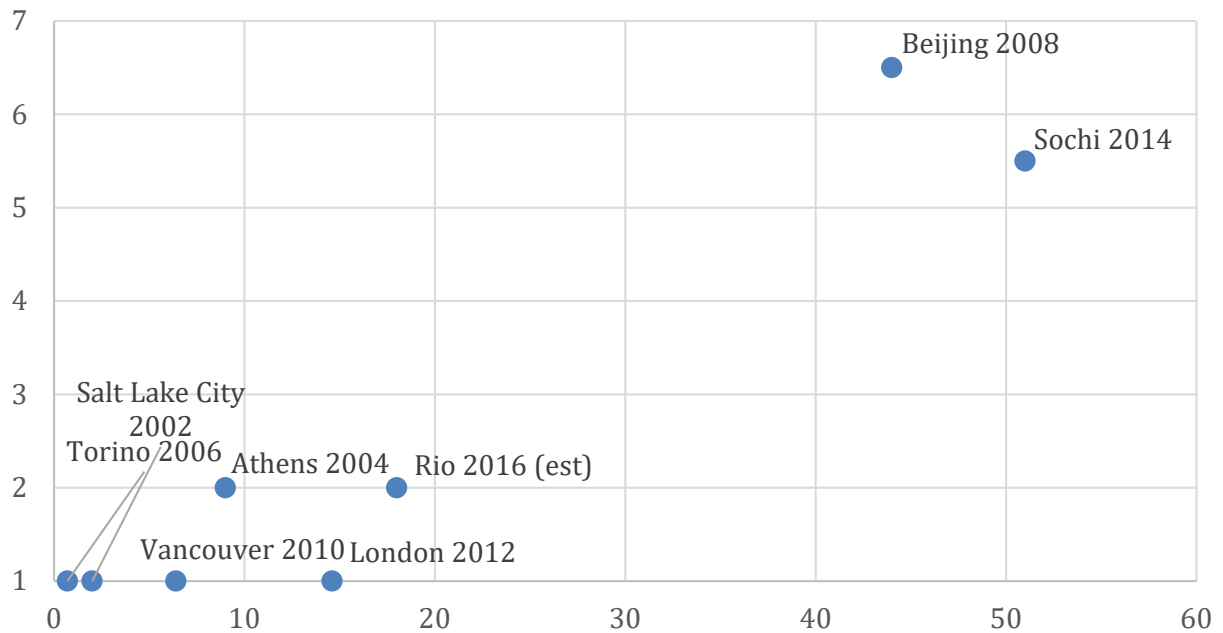


Figure 1.3: Costs of Olympic Games (Billions USD) vs. Freedom House Scores⁴



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¹ The Freedom House (freedomhouse.org) “Freedom in the World” index rates countries on a scale of 1 (free) to 7 (not free).

² For information on the selectorate survey, see:

<<http://alexanderhamilton.as.nyu.edu/page/survey#q1>>.

³ Based on a keyword search of papers indexed in online APSA programs. There was no difference in results for “authoritarian,” “authoritarianism,” or “dictatorship.” However, “democracy” is so widely used across all subfields that it was virtually useless, while “democracies” and “democratization” appear to be the purview of Comparative Politics and (to a lesser extent) International Relations.

⁴ “Cost of the Olympic Games, 2014; Müller, 2016.